PROVIDING ACCESS TO FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN REGIONAL COMMUNITIES: THE CART OR THE HORSE?

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores lifelong learning through the provision of regional and rural education in relation to national and global trends. The paper draws on the experience of the Centre for Regional Education, Orange; this centre being a multi-sector initiative that focuses on improved access to further and higher education, especially for regional and rural students, through an expanded range of degree programs, curriculum pathways, and resources.

INTRODUCTION

The re-shaping of post-compulsory education has become an important agenda item for education policy in Australia. Transnational education, the impact of new information and communication technologies on education, and the definition of educational services as “cross-border trade” are examples of the way in which this issues can be located and conceptualised. Recent reports in this area include the UNESCO (2001) studies in higher education, Transnational Education and the New Economy, Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2001) The Global Market for Higher Education, and Duke’s (2002) Managing the Learning University.

While worldwide contexts pose new challenges for educational policy and practice in Australia, they also provide new opportunities for better positioning Australian institutions in ad hoc and ill-formed competitive markets. One of the strategies that the dynamics of the marketplace have brought about in Australia is the reshaping of identity of educational institutions. One example is multi-campus, cross-sectoral partnerships and the question is whether these partnerships involve institutional shifts so that existing paradigms of delivery, pedagogy, and assessment are being altered in favour of better outcomes for previously disadvantaged students.

This paper will explore whether boundaries between education levels, sectors, and providers are being broken down through the formation of new institutional identities that propose better access to further and higher education in rural and regional communities. Of direct significance is a cumulative and extensive body of work from the U.K. on educational choice, “16+” options and trajectories, youth studies, and policy activism. This work is most recently portrayed in a study of access to higher education (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002) that investigated internal status differences through students’ positive and negative choices in further and higher education. This work is based on well-founded theoretical precepts taken from Bourdieu’s typology of “classification” and “judgement” (Ball et al., 2002). The findings suggest that choices are made through differently determined “opportunity structures” that relate to socio-economic and socio-cultural factors. Thus “choice” is now better understood as a meeting point for individual biographies and post-compulsory-education institutional identities, or disengagement and disappointment.

There is a close synergy between Ball’s notion that choice in education is a form of extensive problem-solving (with respect to power and constraints) and the findings from cumulative “pragmatist” research in Australia on choice in primary and secondary school (Crump, 1997a), as well as vocational education and training (Crump & Anderson, 1998). The theoretical framework has been built around a set of premises that include acknowledgment that there are contradictory positions shaping policy, but that it is possible to unify various oppositions (because they are “false dualisms”); for example, contradictory positions between further- and higher-education institutions, governments (national and state), and

1 Other work supporting this position has been undertaken by the same group of authors on internal marketing (Maguire, Ball, & Macrae, 2001a); the refusal of adulthood (Maguire, Ball, & Macrae, 2001b), choice, pathways, and transitions post-16 (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000); and parents, privilege, and the education market-place (Bowe, Ball, & Gewirtz, 1994).
communities or consumers. In particular, it is important to understand whether, and to what extent, multi-partner campuses achieve improved outcomes and to examine if they achieve them more efficiently than traditional institutional structures. Also, it is important to discover whether these new arrangements are available more broadly to the community, given the human and capital costs involved in establishing new ways of post-compulsory provision.

EDUCATIONAL BORDERS

The dramatic increase in retention to Year 12, from 35 percent in 1980 to 73 percent in 2001, has had important effects on post-compulsory education provision in Australia. The changing student population, and the changing purposes of senior secondary education, have led not only to diversity in curriculum and pedagogy within existing secondary schools, but also to diversity in institutional arrangements (see DETYA, 2000). One of the NSW Government’s election commitments in 2003 was to break down barriers between schools, TAFE colleges, and universities in order to maximise cooperation across the public-education sector. This paper discusses prospects and problems of the relationship between senior-secondary education and other educational sectors, which traditionally have functioned separately. In recent years, senior-secondary education has been re-aligned; in some instances, with further education rather than with junior-secondary education. The increasing diversity of educational provision for young people is redefining post-compulsory education. This is experienced most clearly in multi-sector campuses and through inter-sectoral arrangements and has the potential to enrich learning cultures in rural and regional Australia.

There is very little evidence-based research on local choice and flexibility in post-compulsory education compared to the wealth of research about school choice undertaken worldwide over the 1990s. Generally, it is believed that, being non-compulsory, the option of choice beyond schooling is self-evident (Crump, 2000). Geographical, class, gender, race, and cultural variables at play in choosing post-compulsory education (Dwyer & Wyn, 1998) are well documented. Yet, there is this new phenomenon of multi-sector partnerships that is recasting these variables. In addition, there is a need for new types of document analysis and conceptualisation of this variation of a market ideology for education. For example, in the UK, (Ball et al., 2000) have shown how privileged students take more of the general education options whereas, disadvantaged students tend to take more of the VET (Vocational Education and Training) courses (see also Crump, 2004).

Historically, these have been segmented on class and gender lines. OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) research shows that for increased job chances, the most significant stage is upper-secondary education; its graduates a third less likely to be unemployed in their early 20s than non-completers (OECD, 1998, p.8). For Australia, Anderson, Clemens and Seddon (1997) have shown that students in VET have different learning styles to those in higher education; a difference that may well exist earlier between senior high-school students. Institutional amalgamations in higher education have been researched earlier, (for example see Harman and Meek, 1988), with processes and outcomes in five countries being the basis of their study. While shaped by the 1981 reforms in Australia, this research had great relevance for the subsequent unification of higher education and colleges of advanced education after 1989. Experience from the Netherlands, for example, where 314 mostly mono-purpose institutions were merged into 51 large multi-purpose institutions, was crucial to the development of policy work in this area in Australia.

Such was the pace of development in Australia in the early 1990s, brought about by further and higher-education amalgamations, that the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) provided a review of practices for credit transfer on behalf of the Commonwealth Government (NBEET, 1992). As early as this, the dual concerns of efficiency and equity were expressed, and principles were adopted by the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee. The general critique was that credit transfer had been conservative and ad hoc, and that this needed to change if post-compulsory education was going to be more flexible about accreditation, assessment, and qualification procedures, and thus provide broader choice options for potential students from all age groups and a wider community. However, most of this remains unsystematic and is undertaken on a student-by-student basis. More recent work was undertaken by Wheelahan (2000) who wrote a report for the National Centre for
Vocational Education and Research Ltd. on “bridging the divide” through developing the institutional structures that most effectively deliver cross-sectoral education and training. Her conclusions were significant in that they provided an overview of tertiary education in Australia, with a mapping of VET, and an exploration of the policy challenges facing “boundary spanners”.

CROSS-SECTORAL VENTURES

One expression of this new milieu in education, helpful for explaining the broader picture, is the emergence of cross-sectoral partnerships involving secondary and other providers of post-compulsory education. The initial move – in Australia and worldwide – has been to take a small, regional, satellite campus of a university and reshape it into a multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral campus. These satellite campuses are often the consequence of an earlier rationalisation of tertiary education (such as the Dawkins’ 1989 “unified system” for Australia – a rationalisation influenced itself by rationalisations elsewhere, such as in Europe earlier in the 1980s). In these cases, the university typically initiates collaboration with senior secondary education and with technical and further education providers, though local factors conducive to such a move need to be present for any courting to be successful. Alternatively, the partnership arises from the search for an identity within a “new university”, previously a college or polytechnic.

These reshaped identities are represented as a response to demands for greater choice and flexibility from clients – students, families, employers, and governments as well as broadening the client base to make these campuses more cost-efficient. While moves in this direction have been accelerating within existing institutions, they are now most visible in new cross-sector institutions. Though the reasons underlying the origins of new multi-sector identities are remarkably similar, the origins are quite varied – suggesting potential for conflicting outcomes, which need to be understood. This became more urgent given the Commonwealth’s support for multi-partner campuses and educational precincts in the recent Higher Education at the Crossroads issues paper (DEST, May, 2002).

An exemplar of the former strategy is the restructuring of the Orange Agricultural College (OAC) by the University of Sydney (USyd). The University of Sydney’s Orange campus is located on a 500 ha property just north of Orange in the Central Tablelands of New South Wales. Orange Agricultural College was opened in 1973 as a College of Advanced Education, and its foundation courses were in the area of farm management. The first enrolment comprised 30 students and enrolments grew consistently during the next 13 years to the peak enrolment of 1300 persons of whom approximately 1000 were enrolled for study by distance education.

The OAC was inherited by the University of Sydney from a failed “unification” with the University of New England, and in 1999 it was restructured into a single-faculty entity as “The University of Sydney, Orange” (UoSO). Initially, all college programs and staff were formed into a Faculty of Rural Management (FRM). In 2003, the FRM was complemented with new programs in the arts, sciences, information technology, and pharmacy, bringing 80 new students a year on to the UoSO. At the end of 1999 the operations at Orange were restructured and the Faculty of Rural Management replaced the former Orange Agricultural College. In 1999 The University of Sydney approached the NSW Department of Education and Training to discuss the possibility of establishing a joint educational facility at Orange. By early 2001 recommendations were made on specifications for a multi-sector educational facility, located on the UoSO campus site. The final mission statement, developed in 2003, is, “To create and provide greater learning flexibility through high-quality, accessible education via a cross-sectoral partnership.”

Features of the Centre for Regional Education, Orange (CREO) include a significantly enhanced range of courses offered by USyd at the Orange campus. Faculties from the University of Sydney will develop an increasingly significant presence in Orange, in both an actual and virtual modes. This will be done via,

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- a significant increase in curriculum cooperation between schools, Western Institute and USyd, including articulation of qualifications and embedding of WI curriculum items into USyd and UoSO programs;
• the creation, documentation, and marketing of learning pathways, from Year 11 to postgraduate degrees. This will be an ongoing process, ensuring that the CREO curriculum reflects community needs;
• an increase in the number of students accessing educational opportunities in Orange, and an increase in the retention of students;
• the developing use of technology to facilitate distance education and alternate delivery models. Videoconferencing and online delivery will be key technologies;
• a clearly defined partnership for the leadership and management of the CREO. A model for the CREO will include a commitment to growth that enhances and ensures appropriate and relevant integration of curriculum, personnel, and facilities;
• a commitment by all parties to the sharing of relevant resources and facilities;
• the relocation of some TAFE facilities to the Orange campus. As a second stage WI is also considering locating other facilities, relevant to the “site curriculum”, on the Orange campus;
• the establishment of a senior high school on the Orange campus (the preferred option of the CREO partners). The school would cater for approximately 600 Year 11 and 12 students, and may grow;
• the enhancement of cooperative industry ventures.

While in 2002 there was a monoculture of agriculture students, from 2003 there were liberal studies and pharmacy students, and in 2004 there are arts, science, dentistry, and nursing students doing full or partial degree completion at Orange, as well as second-year pharmacy students. From 2005 there will be education students and, possibly, social-work students from 2006. Supported by a major capital-works program, these students from new disciplines are transforming the campus in size and make-up – adopting the best features found on a rural campus (hospitality, lifestyle, affordability) but driving adaptations towards a university culture that is not yet in evidence (research focus, scholarship, extramural activities) and a student body nearly as diverse as that found in most post-compulsory settings. The teaching of animal studies, veterinary science nursing, and equine studies by TAFE adds another dimension to the staff and student body that is having a profound effect

THE CART OR THE HORSE?

Perhaps, it is timely to pause and ask what should come first in driving these changes, the cart or the horse? This paradox is worth unravelling as new research is required to determine whether organizational, management, and curriculum changes – in this instance through the formation of cross-sectoral, multi-level educational partnerships – impact on the traditional groupings of students in a distinct manner, and open up access to non-traditional clients for further and higher education. These phenomena can be observed at the intersections between social, economic, political, and cultural shifts currently being felt sharply across Australia and internationally in relation to changing needs and expectations. Such new expectations provided the springboard for the different sectoral partners to want to shape these initiatives. However, policy studies need to look at educational reform through organizational dynamics and institutional policy when researching cross-sectoral, multi-level partnerships.

This is an important problem as – until now – not enough time has elapsed for detailed higher-order evidence to be available for collection from these new forms of post-compulsory education. Earlier research has shaped a list of contradictions in the management of choice and a variety of factors related to the politicisation of education, changing educational demographics, less secure career structures, performance appraisal, and competencies and standards referencing for students. New studies are required to reassess these issues in new contexts. For example, the notion of flexibility has been the key to these contradictions, with the consequent opportunity for post-compulsory education to be more responsive to existing

2 Two pertinent international predecessors, formerly agriculture colleges, are the University of California, Davis, and the University of Wageningen, Netherlands [WUR] – both now multi-discipline universities of high repute. Both maintain a rural focus in their courses and remain responsive to their local communities, but recognise and serve larger national and international purposes and clients. The University of Sydney’s Orange campus shares these objectives and mirrors the WUR vision to provide “Multi-disciplinary education in an international setting”.

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actors in policy, as well as more accessible to a wider range of voices from the community and employers.

International research and theory has recognised how the institutional functioning of schools, the cultural content of curriculum, and the pattern of relations between families and schools, are important sources of educational outcomes (Connell, 1994). What is occurring now, though barely researched, is a reverse articulation of this process, made up of new flows of students between sectors to serve lifelong learning planning and provision, regardless of the structures and functions of the original institutions; something best understood through international comparisons. Also, in the last half of the 1990s, there arose, a need to revamp policy-analysis studies so that they were not just dealing with anachronistic policy contexts and providing rehearsed, deterministic responses (Crump and Ryan, 2001). Addressing gaps in policy research, in order to improve the quality and relevance in this field, should add further to the discipline knowledge base of policy scholarship as well as knowledge about the influence of international policy on the shape of post-compulsory education on Australia.

One of the primary aims of multi-sector institutions is to narrow the gap between success and failure by improving student retention and completion rates at all levels. While this is a matter of institutional self-interest, potentially, for a country as large and diversely populated as Australia, it has advantages for social cohesion and educational equity. Challenges for the future of further and higher education include the need to achieve outcomes and assessment practices that ensure development and learning for all students. This requires merging a competitive environment with a supportive and pastoral role so that institutions set high standards while protecting those who are vulnerable to failure through dislocation, poverty, or other at-risk factors. I would argue for a series of “warranted assumptions” worth exploring in relation to multi-sector institutions: first, there is a common “corridor of experience” between the proposed examples, and second, that policy knowledge and action are intimately associated with the active transformation of an environment in a way that is directed towards the resolution of problems regardless of how satisfactory this may be to the participants (Crump, 1992, 1995).

Factors contributing to successful amalgamations of universities with colleges of advanced education, following the “Dawkins’ reforms” to higher education of the later 1980s included, it was voluntary in nature, it had clear goals, enough time was allowed for implementation, it established a firm timetable with realistic goals, it planned for real savings particularly with regard to administrative costs, and there were frequent evaluative and reflective meetings. Much the same list can be seen to apply to the formation, and success, of cross-sectoral partnerships that came about in the late 1990s. Whether these partnerships promote student learning through the different sectors, strategically respond to student needs and values about education, and serve the differing purposes of each of the sectors has not yet been established.

Investing in the education and skills-base of Australia’s youth is a key strategy being employed to achieve the nation’s economic objective and political vision of becoming an advanced knowledge-based economy capable of competing in the global market. While harnessing the talent and skills of rural and regional young people in ways that provide advantages to themselves, their community, and the nation is a complex and difficult task, multi-sector institutions appear to be well-suited to provide better-educated, more fruitfully-employed and more highly-skilled people. However, the policies and mechanisms to drive these initiatives have not always been compatible with existing practices (Crump, 1997b) and there is much to be learnt from international perspectives. Reforms in post-compulsory education have shaped incentives and stages that take students through education and/or training in a planned sequence of learning and assessment.

CONCLUSIONS

An increasing marketisation of education within a legislated framework and a regulated education economy are factors common to comparable situations in other countries (see Middleton, [2000] for the UK, and Redell, [2001] for Australia). Even though new institutional identities necessarily evolve, going back to the policy texts and oral history of “why” is crucial for understanding the real significance of the new flexibility and choice in post-compulsory education. There are disincentives for each of the partners in a new,
integrated campus or arrangement, despite suggested long-term benefits, that also call for explanation. In creating something new, there is the temptation for each partner to protect their institutional identity, structure, and functions while aiming to maximise institutional benefits (Shoemaker, Allison, Gum, Harmoni, Lindfield, & Nolan, 2000).

There is a chance that these new institutions will fail as they have taken a risk in facing a changed world openly and enthusiastically without clear guidelines or well-marked boundaries. Regulation is necessary to ensure accountability, yet new arrangements suggest that freedom in decision-making is necessary to ensure performance of education at a level congruent with institutional and national goals. Understanding the purposes of the multi-sector institutions and how to make sense of what they express about international policy perspectives is an important objective for future policy work in the context of lifelong learning. This should provide information for purposive decision-making – within governments and the institutions themselves – about future strategies for implementation and the extent to which the Australian approach has been progressive or regressive. Have we put the cart first instead of the horse?

REFERENCES


WEB-BASED INFORMATION SEARCHING: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN ORDER TO ENHANCE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS CRITICAL GRADUATE ATTRIBUTE

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ABSTRACT

Exploring essential differences between four categories of variation in student experiences of information searching, this paper outlines each category’s structure of awareness. This structure reveals the way in which variation influences learning design to bring about the ways of experiencing searching we want students to engage in.

INTRODUCTION

Analysing the viewpoints and references provided by students in the papers they submit can be both rewarding and frustrating; rewarding if the student shows great promise and an obvious understanding of his or her work, and frustrating when it is clear that the student has totally misunderstood the subject matter and failed to recognise, or locate, relevant references. The latter situation causes questions to roll around in the teacher’s brain, begging for answers to this puzzling phenomenon, while answers remain fleeting, vague, and even confusing. What is clear is that student experiences of web-based information searching are varied. Furthermore, their reference lists reveal that many students hold a basic ability to search for information, but an inability to perceive resources that are both relevant and significant.

This paper reports research findings that highlight how structural variations reveal the essential differences in student experiences of web-based information searching. The intention is to amplify a previous paper (Edwards & Bruce, 2002), which provided the focus and meaning of four categories of variation in student searching experiences. This paper will show how the identified structural variations can be used to design activities that may bring about the ways of experiencing searching we want students to engage in, so that, on graduation, they will be able to search more effectively. In order to understand this, variation theory will be outlined, explaining how to apply the theory in teaching. The implications for both assessment and curriculum design will be described, along with strategies that might be used to encourage students to increase their searching skills.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Today’s tertiary-level students have grown up during the IT revolution. Exposed to popular media culture that suggests someone can “googlewhack” or “google” their problem to find an answer, students may have little comprehension of a world where searching for information does not involve a computer. Most believe searching is easy: find the search window, type in the desired topic, click the search button, scan the results list, and select. Does this simplistic perspective, however, contribute to a lack of understanding of the